The Queer Transnational in Kate O'Brien and Elizabeth Bowen

Naoise Murphy

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Introduction

The queer experience in Irish writing can be described as an experience of estrangement from the nation. Disillusion and migration have been the keynotes of the queer literary imagination, preoccupations that are still visible in the contemporary work of writers such as Naoise Dolan and Darragh Martin. In the first half of the twentieth century, the pursuit of national consolidation in the precariously legitimate Irish Free State was a project of entrenching heterosexism and silencing disruptive erotic possibilities. Queer identifications were exiled, constructed as foreign, polluting influences in the rigidly bordered nation.[1] Feminist and queer ways of thinking thus pose a potent challenge to the heteronormativity of the modern Irish nation-state; however, the constitutive role of transnational modes of thought has been overlooked. In myriad ways, the transnational is interwoven with queer imaginaries; they cannot be thought without one another. This dualistic contestation of hegemonic sex/gender conventions can be helpfully drawn together in the term 'the queer transnational.'

The novels of Elizabeth Bowen and Kate O'Brien offer one account of the interweaving of queer and transnational thinking and the destabilising effects of the 'queer transnational' in Irish cultural life. What makes the queer and the transnational legible as mutually constitutive in the work of O'Brien and Bowen is their sustained engagement with the thematics of abjection. These two queerly-oriented writers deploy the abject as a strategy of queer feminist resistance to the rigidly bordered nation. In accordance with Julia Kristeva's concept of the abject, those cast out of the national imaginary trouble the stability of its identity and borders. As Kristeva writes, 'the jettisoned object, is radically excluded and draws me toward the place where meaning collapses'.[2] According to Robert Phillips, 'it is in this liminal space where the subject experiences a crisis of meaning in which transformation is possible'.[3] The dissolution of meaning – of structures of exclusion and difference – in the work of these novelists, opens up space for transformation. As Phillips notes, queer and trans thinkers have embraced abjection as 'a constructive political strategy, which can disrupt and confound long-standing systems of power

[1] Kathryn Conrad, 'Queer Treasons: Homosexuality and Irish National Identity', *Cultural Studies* 15.1 (2001): 124–137; Siobhán Kilfeather and Eibhear Walshe, 'Contesting Ireland: The Erosion of Heterosexual Consensus, 1940-2001', *The Field Day Anthology of Irish Writing, Vol. 4: Irish Women's Writing and Traditions,* eds. Angela Bourke et al. (Cork: Cork University Press, 2002): 1040; Diarmaid Ferriter, *Occasions of Sin: Sex and Society in Modern Ireland* (London: Profile Books, 2009), 258-259.

[2] Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection,* trans. L. S. Roudiez. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982), 2.

[3] Robert Phillips, 'Abjection', *TSQ* 1.1-2 (2014): 20.

that are sustained by the methodical exclusion, repression, and silencing of certain others'.[4] This reclaiming of the abject is invoked with similar effects by O'Brien and Bowen, making visible their investments in queer transnational ways of thinking.

For Kristeva, the abject is 'what disturbs identity, system, order. What does not respect borders, positions, rules. The in-between, the ambiguous, the composite'.[5] Where the abject is invoked in the works of O'Brien and Bowen, it destabilises the normative order through its alignment with queer erotics, with travel across borders, or with tropes of sea-crossings, train journeys, thresholds and points of departure. My conception of the queer potential of the abject is informed by lesbian/feminist scholarship on these writers, from Phyllis Lassner to Heather Ingman.[6] It also draws from Bennett and Royle's 1995 theorisation of dissolution in the work of Bowen:

> Bowen's writing is concerned with dissolution - with dispersion, melting, break-up and death. Living, in the work of Bowen, is dissolving. [...] Bowen's novels present dissolutions at the level of personal identity, patriarchy, social conventions and language itself –up to and including the language of fiction and criticism.[7]

This understanding of dissolution brings together a range of concepts that constitute the queer transnational orientations of Bowen and O'Brien. The dissolving effects of the abject revolve around ideas of fluidity and liminality, fracturing and fragmentation, the in-between and the non-teleological. In these novels, images and metaphors of fluidity and deconstruction work against notions of stability, where moments of transnational movement and exchange illuminate the unnatural performance of identity. Characters are suspended in liminal spaces, in transit, refusing to be assimilated to reductive binaries. 'Queer' is understood as a dissolution – a fragmentation – that leads to an opening-out of possibilities. To borrow from Sedgwick, it refers to 'the open mesh of possibilities, gaps, overlaps, dissonances and resonances, lapses and excesses of meaning when the constituent elements of anyone's gender, of anyone's sexuality aren't made (or can't be made) to signify monolithically'.[8] The in-between, ambiguous abject disturbs the rigidity of nationalist political certainties, thereby framing the queer transnational in opposition to the nation. The term 'transnational', then, here refers to a mode of thinking beyond the nation

[4] Phillips, 20.
[5] Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, 4.
[6] renée c. hoogland. *Elizabeth Bowen: A Reputation in Writing* (New York: NYU Press, 1994); Phyllis Lassner, *Elizabeth Bowen* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1990); Harriet S. Chessman, 'Women and Language in the Fiction of Elizabeth Bowen', *Twentieth Century Literature* 29.1 (1983), 69-85; Heather Ingman, *Twentieth-century Fiction by Irish Women: Nation and Gender* (Aldershot: Ashgate Publishing, 2007); Eibhear Walshe, *Sex, Nation and Dissent in Irish Writing* (Cork: Cork University Press, 1997); Ailbhe Smyth, 'Counterpoints: A Note (or Two) on Feminism and Kate O'Brien', *Ordinary People Dancing: Essays on Kate O'Brien*, ed. Eibhear Walshe (Cork: Cork University Press, 1993), 24-35; Emma Donoghue, '"Out of Order": Kate O'Brien's Lesbian Fictions', *Ordinary People Dancing: Essays on Kate O'Brien,* ed. Eibhear Walshe (Cork: Cork University Press, 1993), 36-58.
[7] Andrew Bennett and Nicholas Royle. *Elizabeth Bowen and the Dissolution of the Novel: Still Lives.* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1995), xix.
[8] Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Tendencies* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1993), 8.

— a trans-ing of the national — that is aligned with queerness and channelled through the dissolving effects of the abject.

This queer transnational relates to and anticipates the anti-social thesis in queer theory, in its rejection of the imperative to reproduce the nation. The priorities of these bourgeois writers diverge significantly from the radical positions of queer theory, yet their interest in the disruptive effects of marginality calls for a queer reading. Nevertheless, the radical potential of this embrace of abjection must not be overstated. Reading Bowen and O'Brien as queer does not straightforwardly imply antinormativity, but rather, a complex dissident positionality that upholds elements of normativity while destabilising others, 'dissonances and resonances', in Sedgwick's terms, that overlap and contradict.

Published between 1929 and 1968, the novels discussed here span the formative years of the modern Irish State. Eibhear Walshe characterises the postcolonial predicament of the new state as an atmosphere of heightened anxiety around gender and sexuality. In reaction to British imperialist stereotyping of the colonised as feminine and passive, the condition of postcoloniality becomes marked by a 'narrowing of gender hierarchies' and 'silencing of sexual difference'.[9] The normalising and homogenising investments of the new nation-state are most visible in the 1929 Censorship of Publications Act, designed to edit any hint of sexual deviance out of the national arena. Eve Patten's recent work builds on and qualifies this view, emphasising the 'fractured and inconsistent' character of Ireland's modernity throughout the twentieth century.[10] Writers such as Bowen and O'Brien cannot be viewed as simply representative of a national literature, or as straightforwardly resistant to the regularising impulses of State actors. As Patten puts it, they 'wrote in a sceptical adjacency to its ruling hierarchies; alienated perhaps, but also sparked and animated by its imposed constraints'.[11] Alienation and constraint are key features of O'Brien's novels, particularly those set in Ireland. In *The Land of Spices* (1942), for example, O'Brien consolidates an image of the political climate of nationalist Ireland in the first half of the twentieth century. I explore how this coming-of-age novel comments on the coming-of-age of the Irish nation, and establishes the transnational quality of queer/feminist resistance to the rigid, essentialising heteronormativity of the political elite. Turning to *Mary Lavelle* (1936), I consider the formulation of the queer abject in O'Brien and demonstrate how it functions to dissolve borders and categories, resisting the hierarchies imposed by Irish State modernity. With Elizabeth Bowen's *The Last September* (1929), I expand this discussion of the queer abject, concentrating on Bowen's queer stylistic choices and her invocation of terrorist aesthetics. Finally, I use *Eva Trout* (1968) to think about Bowen's vision of trans abjection and the trans-ing of the national.

'Our nuns are not a nation'

The emerging Irish nation-state is the analytic target of Bowen and O'Brien's queer deconstruction. Their works explore what it means to go beyond the nation, starting from a

[9] Eibhear Walshe, *Sex, Nation and Dissent in Irish Writing*, 5.
[10] Eve Patten, *Irish Literature in Transition, 1940-1980* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020), 22.
[11] Patten, 7.

Woolfian understanding of women's estrangement from it.[12] This *going beyond* resonates with the recent work of Alyosxa Tudor, who suggests that '"transing" the nation and "transing" gender could be thought as critical moves for a radical deconstruction of gendered and national belonging'.[13] Tudor's explorations of the many 'dimensions of transnationalism' are illustrative, encompassing the radical potential of this 'transing' and also the reductive logics of other 'forms of minority nationalism that reproduce racism, sexism, heteronormativity and gender binary as the norm of Western national belonging',[14] such as homonationalism.[15] This tension, between rejections of oppressive nationalist orthodoxies and alternative constructions of belonging that retain other structural inequalities, is in evidence in the novels studied here, perhaps most powerfully in O'Brien's *The Land of Spices* (1942).[16] The convent of *La Compagnie de la Sainte Famille* represents the author's ideal of transnational feminist solidarity. It is a privileged space for the daughters of the white European middle classes, no matter how persuasively the Reverend Mother may argue against snobbery. Though it is unquestionably a locus of resistance to narrow-minded Irish nationalism, it also reproduces the binary structures of the modern Western nation-state through its doctrines of appropriate white femininity: '*la pudeur et la politesse'* ('modesty and manners'). In addition to this propagation, however, *The Land of Spices* is a valuable account of queer transnational resistance at a politically charged time of national consolidation,[17] which helps to build a case for the inextricability of queer and transnational ways of thinking in Irish writing.

By setting the novel between 1904-1914 – a formative period for the ideology of Irish nationalism – O'Brien confronts the ideals that provided the foundations of the newly-formed state. The character of the Bishop represents this ideology, and 'the Irish hierarchy's distrust of an independent religious Order', which is 'too European for present-day Irish requirements'.[18] The convent's independence from the nationalist project is crucial: 'You see, our nuns *are not* a nation, and our business is not with national matters'.[19] As Elizabeth Cullingford has noted, the figure of Mother Mary Andrew, who combines 'nationalism, intellectual authoritarianism, and physical bullying', hints at an alternative in which children are put at risk of serious abuse by the imbrication of religious institutions and state nationalism.[20] However, it is the Order's transnational character that facilitates its feminism. For the male Church hierarchy, xenophobia and misogyny are shown to be logically aligned. The nationalist project relies on containing women within domestic spaces in the roles of wife and mother. Education is conceived as preparation for marriage, whether 'as suitable wives for English Majors and Colonial Governors'

[12] Virginia Woolf, *The Three Guineas* (London: Hogarth Press, 1938), 197; 'as a woman I have no country. As a woman I want no country'.
[13] Alyosxa Tudor, 'dimensions of transnationalism', *feminist review* 117 (2017): 20.
[14] Tudor, 22.
[15] Jasbir K. Puar, *Terrorist Assemblages: Homonationalism in Queer Times* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007).
[16] Kate O'Brien, *The Land of Spices* (London: Virago, 1988).
[17] Published in 1942, *The Land of Spices* can be read as a protest against the Irish Free State's contentious policy of political neutrality during the Second World War.
[18] O'Brien, *The Land of Spices*, 96, 220.
[19] O'Brien, *The Land of Spices*, 16.
[20] Elizabeth Cullingford, '"Our Nuns Are Not a Nation": Politicizing the Convent in Irish Literature and Film', *Éire-Ireland* 41.1-2 (2006): 28.

or 'to be the wives of *Irishmen*'.[21] It is the all-female space of the convent, educating women for their own sake and opening doors to foreign cultural influences, that strips male authority figures of their power and undermines nationalist constructions of Irish identity. The Order's transnational cultural hybridity is at the heart of this disempowering of masculinist nationalist authority.

Currents of lesbian eroticism run through the novel, right from the opening scene of '*Schwärmerei*', or 'hysterical fuss', inspired amongst the schoolgirls by the beauty of a young novice nun.[22] O'Brien deliberately invokes nationalist constructions of homosexuality as a 'foreign vice'[23] in the story of Henry Archer (a character name straight out of Oscar Wilde or Henry James). A former Cambridge fellow, exiled to Brussels for his sexual deviance, Henry is a ghostly presence in the novel as his daughter, Helen, grapples with her homophobic and self-punishing response to the possibilities of queer love. Queerness is firmly identified with a Continental European imaginary. Meanwhile, the system of mentorship that develops between Helen as Reverend Mother and the young protagonist Anna Murphy is characterised as a mutually enriching and liberating bond. Queer understandings of kinship and belonging encourage a reading of the convent space as a queer alternative to Anna's nuclear family, which O'Brien portrays as neglectful and abusive. The queer kinship system of *Sainte Famille* ('holy family') overrides the patriarchal family when Helen, the alternative 'Mother', claims Anna as the Order's 'child' and ensures she is allowed to go to university, against the wishes of her overbearing grandmother. The transnational bond formed between this English-born, Belgian-raised 'Reverend Mother' and her Irish 'child' emerges triumphant over nationally-defined and biologically-delimited relationships.

The conclusion of the novel, for Anna, is a moment of artistic epiphany fostered in another queer transnational relationship, with her Peruvian classmate Pilar: 'she saw Pilar in a new way', 'an exquisite challenge to creativeness', 'a motive in art'.[24] This scene captures the intertwining of the queer and the transnational for O'Brien, but also the ambiguity of the *transnational* in the sense that Tudor outlines. As a rewriting of Joyce's iconic Dollymount Strand scene from *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (1916), O'Brien's moment of aesthetic transcendence overturns the male gaze, replacing it with a more egalitarian conversation between the artist and model. Pilar is a fully-formed character with a name, a personality and a future beyond her interaction with Anna. Simultaneously, however, the dynamics of this lesbian gaze cite and replicate entrenched power structures in Western art: a white artist looking at a non-European subject, exoticising and eroticising her 'lustrous potentiality'.[25] These dynamics are reinforced by insistent references to Western European art history, a lineage of male 'geniuses' into which Anna may be inserted: she 'recalled Mantegna', 'felt a bright memory of Giorgione' and thinks of Goya.[26] O'Brien's egalitarian queer transnationalism strays into a European white exceptionalism

[21] O'Brien, *The Land of Spices*, 97.
[22] O'Brien, *The Land of Spices,* 3.
[23] O'Brien, *The Land of Spices*, 63.
[24] O'Brien, *The Land of Spices*, 286.
[25] O'Brien, *The Land of Spices*, 287.
[26] O'Brien, *The Land of Spices*, 286.

that assigns queer liberation, artistic potential and intellectual flourishing to the delimited space of Continental Europe, upholding the Eurocentrism that a properly 'transnational' politics might be assumed to challenge.

O'Brien's Queer Abject

Pilar is unusual as a South American character, but similar transnational queer relationships feature in several O'Brien novels. A young, androgynous, middle-class Irish woman meets a beautiful European woman who expands her intellectual and sexual horizons, including Fanny and Lucille in *The Flower of May* (1953), Clare and Luisa in *As Music and Splendour* (1958). In addition to these relationships, O'Brien creates characters who integrate aspects of the 'foreign' into their individual identities, becoming transnational subjects. Through the character of Agatha, a lesbian governess in her 1936 novel *Mary Lavelle*, O'Brien asserts the interpenetration of the queer and the transnational. Agatha develops what she calls an 'absurd infatuation'[27] with Mary, the protagonist, who is also an Irish governess in the Spanish town of Altorno. Mary is the archetypal O'Brien character, defined by her longing to be a 'free lance always, [to] belong to no one place or family or person' and by her boyish androgyny.[28] Agatha is unambiguously identified as 'queer' and described in the stereotypical terms of early twentieth-century lesbian images: 'tall, thin', 'hungry-looking', with 'a pale, fanatical face'. [29] But, most notably, she fluently blends Irish and Spanish cultural influences, wearing 'a silver Tara brooch' and also a 'small black mantilla'. Agatha is culturally and linguistically adrift: even her speech has 'Spanish inflections'.[30] For this paradigmatic exiled Irish lesbian, queerness and transnational cultural hybridity mutually signify; both constitute and express her deviance.

Agatha's confession of love to Mary is the emotional core of the novel. This is the moment of radical destabilisation, where, as Emma Donoghue writes, sin 'functions as the common denominator for all sexual orientations'.[31] Setting the scene in front of a church, O'Brien exploits the Catholic Church's condemnation of all forms of non-procreative sexuality to call into question the 'sinfulness' of Agatha's queer desire, questioning the difference between her sexuality and the adulterous affair Mary has been conducting with her employer's son. Mary does not return Agatha's feelings, but neither does she react with the expected shock and disgust: 'Oh, everything's a sin!' she exclaims; 'You take one kind of impossible fancy, I take another'.[32] Instead of alienation, 'a certain relaxation, even an affectionate, unspoken peace'[33] enters their relationship. Categories of heterosexual and homosexual are dissolved; the women are united 'not so much because Agatha fantastically and perversely loved her but because, like her, she

[27] Kate O'Brien, *Mary Lavelle* (London: Virago, 2000), 285.
[28] O'Brien, *Mary Lavelle*, 34, 67, 248, 320.
[29] O'Brien, *Mary Lavelle*, 84-85.
[30] O'Brien, *Mary Lavelle*, 85.
[31] Emma Donoghue, 'Noises from Woodsheds: The Muffled Voices of Irish Lesbian Fiction', *Volcanoes and Pearl Divers: Essays in Lesbian Feminist Studies*, ed. Suzanne Raitt (London: Onlywomen Press, 1995), 185.
[32] O'Brien, *Mary Lavelle*, 285, 296-297.
[33] O'Brien, *Mary Lavelle*, 295.

was fantastically and perversely in love'.[34] Both forms of love are deviant. Adulterous desire, in its transgressive non-normativity, is also read as queer.

Heather Ingman's persuasive reading of *Mary Lavelle* employs Kristeva's theories of women, nationalism and the abject to explore the importance of Mary's encounter with the transnational Other. The embrace of the foreign Other — her sexual relationship with Juanito Areavaga — leads Mary to find 'what is foreign to her nation inside herself', thus becoming 'akin to the Kristevan abject, that which has to be excluded from the self or the nation in order for identity to form' [35] Attention to the queerness of transnational identification, however, suggests that the more powerfully 'abject' character, in Kristevan terms, is Agatha, as Amy Finlay-Jeffrey has argued: 'an outspoken woman and a lesbian, she is more radical a threat to the national construction of female identity than Mary'.[36] Narratologically, by bringing Mary to the bullfight where her personal transformation begins, it is Agatha who 'disturbs identity, system, order. [Who] does not respect borders, positions, rules'. Exiled for her sexual deviance, she embodies the 'in-between, the ambiguous, the composite'.[37] From this place of banishment, Agatha challenges the rigid, essentialist heteronormative Irish national order.

The appearance of the queer abject, in the form of Agatha, leads to a dissolution of binary structures of meaning and identity. This dissolving movement reaches a climax in the final moments of the novel, which seem to transcend the realist frame. The narrative becomes conscious of its status as narrative: Mary is 'going home to her faithful lover with a brutal story', the only 'fruit of her journey to Spain'.[38] There is a refusal of moralising, a radical equalising movement asserting the 'value' of diverse kinds of 'truths'.[39] As 'the words swam before her in a new, wild mist of tears',[40] all stability is swept away and Mary assumes the position of the abject through her new-found ability to dissolve boundaries and identity categories. As she returns to Ireland, Mary will be unable to accommodate her new self to the constraints of a heteronormative system. Recognising this self-transformation, she plans to 'take her godmother's hundred pounds and go away',[41] resigning herself to a life of exile in some unspecified transnational space. The suspended ending of the narrative, with Mary in transit somewhere in Europe, indicates that this new queer subjectivity cannot be incorporated into the nation. In this way, the conclusion of *Mary Lavelle* is one plausible contender for the birth of the queer transnational in Irish women's writing.

[34] O'Brien, *Mary Lavelle*, 296.
[35] Heather Ingman, 'Translating between Cultures: A Kristevan Reading of the Theme of the Foreigner in Some Twentieth-Century Novels by Irish Women', *The Yearbook of English Studies* 36 (2006): 182.
[36] Amy Finlay-Jeffrey, 'Liminal Space and Minority Communities in Kate O'Brien's *Mary Lavelle* (1936)', *Journal of International Women's Studies*, 21.3 (2020):42-43.
[37] Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, 4.
[38] O'Brien, *Mary Lavelle*, 344.
[39] O'Brien, *Mary Lavelle*, 344.
[40] O'Brien, *Mary Lavelle*, 345.
[41] O'Brien, *Mary Lavelle*, 344.

Before the Nation: Bowen's Queer Style

Mary Lavelle is set in 1922, the year of the foundation of the Irish Free State, and explicitly refers to the political rhetoric of nation-building through Mary's longing for 'perpetual self-government'.[42] Published in 1936, a year before the infamously misogynist 1937 Constitution, it is an exercise in thinking beyond the nation, using the disturbing presence of the exiled queer abject, at a moment of national consolidation. As novels about the burgeoning independence of young Irish women, mirrored by the independence of the Irish nation, *Mary Lavelle* can be engaged in conversation with Elizabeth Bowen's *The Last September* (1929), a chronicle of the last days of an Anglo-Irish Big House during the War of Independence. Historically situated at a moment of national possibility before the consolidation of a repressive heterosexist nationalist ideology, Bowen's novel might be viewed as an exercise in thinking beyond the nation *before* the nation, an exploration of the queer potential of the revolutionary moment.

In *The Last September* as in O'Brien's novels, the queer abject makes regular incursions into the heterosexual structures of the patriarchal establishment, here, the settler-colonial institution of the Big House. Bowen's protagonist, Lois Farquar, is distracted from her engagement to the British soldier, Gerald Lesworth, and enthralled by Marda Norton, the exciting, cosmopolitan, androgynous visitor from across the water. The novel is built around the movements of visitors arriving at and leaving Danielstown, the ancestral home of the Naylors, Lois' aunt and uncle. Marda is the ultimate disruptive presence. Along with her air of cosmopolitanism, her lack of femininity marks her as outside the norm of Anglo-Irish heteronormative gender structures:

> Fixed in their row, the others all looked up at her. She was tall, her back as she stood looking over the field was like a young man's in its vigorous slightness. She escaped from the feminine pear shape, her shoulders were square, legs long from the knee down. Her light brown dress slipped and fitted with careless accuracy, defining spareness negatively under its slack folds. Sophistication opened further horizons to Lois.[43]

Her gender nonconformity is aligned with her apart-ness, with ideas of 'escape' and the opening out of 'horizons' linked to travel across national borders. She suggests movement and vigour, in stark contrast to the stultifying atmosphere of Danielstown, with its inhabitants 'fixed in their row' and 'the magnetism they all exercised by their being static'.[44] Gender categories are expanded in the imagined transnational space.

Marda awakens Lois' queer sexuality, previously suppressed by her engagement to the uninspiring Gerald, who represents the rigid boundaries of national identity. Gerald is Bowen's comic portrait of a patriotic believer in the British Empire: 'He took up the Spectator, read an article on Unrest and thought of the Empire. Mechanically his hand went up to his tie'.[45] Gerald longs for 'a time when it all should be accurately, finally fenced about and all raked over'; he

[42] O'Brien, *Mary Lavelle*, 27.
[43] Elizabeth Bowen, *The Last September* (London: Penguin, 1942), 79.
[44] Bowen, *The Last September,* 166.
[45] Bowen, *The Last September,* 87.

values 'not breaking boundaries from their generous allotment'.[46] Bennett and Royle contrast Gerald's respect for 'boundaries' with the regular penetration of the physical boundaries of the estate by republican paramilitaries and the infringements upon the boundaries of the self that these incursions imply. The self, for Bowen, is constantly subject to invasion and hauntings, something like the 'subject-in-process' described by Kristeva.[47] Necessarily 'traversed by death, [people are] only "real" to the extent that they are traversed by figuration, by fiction'.[48] Gerald's death at the hands of the paramilitaries demonstrates that 'to be a coherent, stable, finally self-identical subject is to be non-human, dead'.[49]

This reading makes an important contribution to discussions of national, sexual and gender categories in Bowen. Through Gerald, stable national/colonial relations are allied to normative heterosexual relationships. Lois' response to Gerald is totally lacking in emotion: 'So that was being kissed: just an impact, with inside blankness'.[50] This is followed by an articulation of her desire for escape: 'She shut her eyes and tried — as sometimes when she was seasick, locked in misery between Holyhead and Kingstown — to be enclosed in nonentity, in some ideal no-place, perfect and clear as a bubble'.[51] This 'no-place' recalls Mary's suspension in the transnational space of the moving train. Lois seems to want to inhabit the hyphen in the signifier 'Anglo-Irish', to live in the 'trans' of transnational movement. Indeed, Bowen is said to have remarked that she considered herself to be most at home in the middle of the Irish Sea.

Lois' queerness is conveyed in this desire for suspension in a transnational 'no-place' and reflected in the spatial dynamics of the Big House. Jed Esty notes, for example, that her love for 'indefinition and locationlessness' is evident in her loitering 'in the thresholds and anterooms of the house, and of the text'.[52] In a crucial moment for Lois' coming-to-selfhood, she overhears her aunt and a guest discussing her relationship with Gerald:

> But when Mrs Montmorency came to: 'Lois is very —' she was afraid suddenly. She had a panic. She didn't want to know what she was, she couldn't bear to: knowledge of this would stop, seal, finish one. Was she now to be clapped down under an adjective, to crawl round lifelong inside some quality like a fly in a tumbler? Mrs Montmorency should not![53]

In response, Lois bangs, kicks and pushes the objects surrounding her, including a water jug, basin, slop-pail and washstand – items associated with the ritualised construction of femininity through beauty practices. Later, she notices 'a crack in the basin' that comes to stand for this rejection of the definitive naming of her identity.[54] Lois' suppressed rage surfaces through this

[46] Bowen, *The Last September,* 87, 41.
[47] Julia Kristeva, 'The Subject in Process', *The Tel Quel Reader*, eds. Patrick ffrench and Roland-François Lack (New York: Routledge, 1998).
[48] Bennett and Royle, 21.
[49] Bennett and Royle, 21.
[50] Bowen, *The Last September,* 88.
[51] Bowen, *The Last September,* 88-89.
[52] Jed Esty, *Unseasonable Youth: Modernism, Colonialism, and the Fiction of Development* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 183.
[53] Bowen, *The Last September,* 60.
[54] Bowen, *The Last September,* 60.

first instance of destruction and will come to be targeted at the whole edifice of the Big House and the system it represents. The crack, mirrored by gaps and ellipses throughout the narrative — Neil Corcoran memorably describes *The Last September* as 'a novel full of holes'[55] — reveals the fundamental meaninglessness of the identity categories that are produced and sustained by flimsy physical objects. Lois meditates later on how 'she and those home surroundings still further penetrated each other mutually in the discovery of a lack'.[56] This discovery of nothingness at the core of the self represents a denaturalisation of constructions of the autonomous self in literary realism, or as Bennett and Royle put it, 'The dissolution of the boundaries between thought and the physical in *The Last September*, is also, finally, a dissolution of the boundaries of the self'.[57]

This dissolution leaves Lois in a similarly abjected position to Mary Lavelle at the close of O'Brien's novel. renée c. hoogland, in a lesbian feminist reading of *The Last September*, draws the connection with Kristeva, observing that Lois embodies the subject-in-process 'on account of her sexual indefiniteness and her unfixed gender identity'.[58] The 'static'[59], fixing quality of Danielstown stands in direct contrast to Lois' desire for a liberating queer relationship with Marda that traverses national boundaries. This desire manifests in a violent hope, 'that instead of fading to dust in summers of empty sunshine, the carpet would burn with the house in a scarlet night to make one flaming call upon Marda's memory'.[60] Robert L. Caserio has drawn on Fredric Jameson's concept of the political unconscious to suggest that the female characters in *The Last September* enter into a 'subversive alliance' with the Irish Republican Army.[61] Read in the light of the novel's closing image of Danielstown ablaze, 'the sky tall with scarlet',[62] Lois' queer desire to watch the house burn cements her alliance with the republican terrorists who have shadowed the narrative throughout. This alignment of queerness and the revolutionary republican movement in the Jamesian unconscious of the text has radical implications for understandings of Irish nationalism. Lois is dangerously, erotically excited by the republican threat that lurks in the countryside around the estate. The climax of her and Marda's relationship is their confrontation with an IRA gunman hiding in an abandoned mill, a scene suffused with sexual tension:

> Marda put an arm round her waist, and in an ecstasy at this compulsion Lois entered the mill. Fear heightened her gratification; she welcomed its inrush, letting her look climb the scabby and livid walls to the frightful stare of the sky. Cracks ran down; she expected, now with detachment, to see them widen, to see the walls peel back from a cleft.[63]

This description of the walls recalls the cracked water-basin, marking this as another moment of queer resistance. The final destruction of the Big House is incendiary in more ways than one. By

[55] Neil Corcoran, *Elizabeth Bowen: The Enforced Return* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 39.
[56] Bowen, 166.
[57] Bennett and Royle, 16.
[58] hoogland, 58.
[59] Bowen, *The Last September,* 166.
[60] Bowen, *The Last September,* 98.
[61] Robert. L. Caserio, *The Novel in England 1900-1950: History and Theory* (New York: Twayne, 1999), 251.
[62] Bowen, *The Last September,* 206.
[63] Bowen, *The Last September,* 123-124.

queering Irish republicanism, Bowen attributes a radical anti-heteronormativity to the political underpinnings of the new state, creating a crack in its heterosexist foundations. In the logical culmination of Lois' impulse to destroy the material surroundings that fix and localise identity, IRA terrorism becomes a force for queer emancipation.

Jasbir Puar's paradigm-shifting concept of homonationalism highlights how 'queerness is always already installed in the project of naming the terrorist; the terrorist does not appear as such without the concurrent entrance of perversion, deviance'.[64] Puar's formulation of the abject, queer figure of the terrorist helps to crystallise the narrative function of the IRA in this novel – paradoxically perhaps, given that the terrorist activities of the IRA in the 1920s had the ultimate effect of establishing a modern nation-state. The political queerness of this vision of the terrorist is mirrored by Bowen's stylistic choices, which further construct the intrusive presence as a form of queer abject. The subversive forces lurking in the darkness around the demesne are reflected in Bowen's strange, alienating prose, shot through with queer, destabilising stylistic choices. From the earliest critical interventions, scholars have remarked upon Bowen's awkward, unnatural style. Jocelyn Brooke identified the 'distorted fragmentary effect' of her work, while William Heath criticised her 'pointless verbal excess', and Hermione Lee 'her highly formal, contrived, oblique, often elusive style'.[65] This fragmentary, excessive, oblique and elusive style resonates with the disruptive potential of queerness. Susan Osborn comments on the intrusion of unexpected ugliness, irregularities that demonstrate a 'blatant disregard for the accepted norms of intellectual decorum, grammatical and syntactical coherence and technical competence',[66] into the polished, genteel prose associated with the 'Big House novel'. Stylistically, these intrusions reflect the unwelcome physical invasions of the estate: 'Laurels breathed coldly and close: on her bare arms the tips of leaves were timid and dank, like tongues of dead animals';[67] 'the four young sons in excitement jiggled among the cherubim'.[68] Action is attributed to inanimate objects in a way that 'conspires to efface the human subject'.[69] Gates 'twang' rather than 'clang', cars 'slide' and trees 'exhale',[70] creating a hallucinatory world detached from human agency. Osborn's comment that 'the language of the novel had been invaded by something that was not supposed to come out into the open'[71] is suggestive of queerness, of the logic of the closet.[72] Her reading points out the numerous ways in which Bowen's stylistic choices trouble the 'interpretive binaries' of signification; by 'unsystematically violat[ing] rules of mimetic representation and realistic discourse while establishing a

[64] Puar, xxiv.
[65] Jocelyn Brooke*, Elizabeth Bowen* (London: Longmans, Green & Co, 1952), 25; William Heath, *Elizabeth Bowen: An Introduction to Her Novels* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1961), 44; Hermione Lee, *Elizabeth Bowen* (London: Vintage, 1999), 3.
[66] Susan Osborn, '"How to measure this unaccountable darkness between the trees": The Strange Relation of Style and Meaning in *The Last September*', *Elizabeth Bowen: New Critical Perspectives* (Cork: Cork University Press, 2009), 39.
[67] Bowen, *The Last September,* 33.
[68] Bowen, *The Last September,* 106.
[69] Maud Ellmann, *Elizabeth Bowen: The Shadow Across the Page* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2003), 67.
[70] Bowen, *The Last September,* 7, 67, 206.
[71] Osborn, 45.
[72] Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Epistemology of the Closet* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990).

relationship with them, the prose both permits logical conceptualization and challenges it'.[73] Any conclusive interpretation of the novel is undermined by this incomplete linguistic deconstruction; meaning remains suspended in an 'open mesh of possibilities, gaps, overlaps, dissonances and resonances, lapses and excesses of meaning'.[74]

These queer stylistic choices skew the conventional, linear progression of the narrative. The tripartite structure of the novel, for example, announces a country house novel of manners built around a series of visits: 'The Arrival of Mr and Mrs Montmorency'; 'The Visit of Miss Norton'; 'The Departure of Gerald'. However, the 'departure' in question euphemistically refers to Gerald's death at the hands of the IRA. This final section 'at once completes the pattern and upsets it',[75] cracking open the genteel surface of the novel with this unwelcome reality. A death-inflected instability is structurally embedded in the narrative. Bowen's prose refuses to move the narrative forward, constantly betraying an impulse towards stasis. Corcoran comments on its 'reflexive turning back in upon itself rather than a committed motion forward'.[76] Sentences are constructed around negativity, creating an impression of underlying inertia: 'defining spareness negatively'; 'our side – which is no side – rather scared, rather isolated, not expressing anything except tenacity to something that isn't there – that never was there'; 'not a value could fail to be affected'.[77] Bowen's queer resistance to fixity and certainty is evident in the warped syntax of her prose. Crucial information is often elided from descriptions, while sentences resist legibility with contorted constructions such as 'still further penetrated each other mutually' or 'In their heart like a dropped pin the grey glazed roof reflecting the sky lightly glinted'.[78] Logical causation is skewed — linear, forward-moving prose is abandoned in favour of 'canceled time', an embrace of stillness, as in the following passage:

> While above, the immutable figures, shedding into the rush of dusk smiles, frowns, every vestige of personality, kept only attitude - an outmoded modishness, a quirk of a flare, hands slipped under a ruffle or spread over the cleft of a bosom - canceled time, negatived personality and made of the lower cheerfulness, dining and talking, the faintest exterior friction.
> In Laurence's plate of clear soup six peas floated.[79]

Rigid patterns of classification are gradually undone as the house moves towards its destruction. The reader is led to the eventual 'discovery of a lack' by the bewildering experience of trying to make sense of prose that continually resists interpretation, by sentences that lull one into the impression of legibility despite their fundamental meaninglessness. Bowen's queer style explodes the conventions of literary realism, cracking open the foundations of the new national edifice from the inside.

[73] Osborn, 42.
[74] Sedgwick, *Tendencies*, 8.
[75] Maria DiBattista, 'Elizabeth Bowen's Troubled Modernism', *Modernism and Colonialism: British and Irish Literature, 1899–1939,* eds. Richard Begam and Michael Valdez Moses (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007), 236.
[76] Corcoran, 3.
[77] Bowen, *The Last September,* 79, 82, 129.
[78] Bowen, *The Last September,* 166, 66.
[79] Bowen, *The Last September,* 24.

Lois disappears from the pages of the novel without warning:

> 'And tell me: how's Lois?'
> 'Oh, gone, you know.'[80]

Leaving for France, she adds another layer to her hyphenated national identity, and can no longer exist within the pages of the Big House novel. As they did for Mary Lavelle, queer impulses result in her ejection from the heteronormative plot and final suspension in the 'no-place' of transnational transit. These two novels, studied together, provide an overview of how queerness functions for O'Brien and Bowen, a powerful destabilising force that reaches out beyond the borders of the newly-formed nation. *Mary Lavelle* and *The Last September* provide a queer alternative to the identity politics of the nationalist state, undermining the solidity of the Free State's conservative, heteronormative self-image.

Eva Trout and Trans Abjection

Bowen's early novels are full of displaced cosmopolitan subjects, young women who are at home in the in-between spaces of transnational movement — Lois in *The Last September* (1929), Sydney in *The Hotel* (1927), Emmeline in *To the North* (1932). Her experiments with these characters culminate in *Eva Trout* (1968), a development of the exiled queer abject in Irish fiction that invites a more in-depth dialogue with the 'transness' of the queer transnational. The eponymous protagonist is a fascinating example of queer 'sideways growth', as theorised by Kathryn Bond Stockton; a figure who serves 'to prick (deflate, or just delay) the vertical, forward-motion metaphor of growing up'.[81] Eva transes gender: Susan Stryker defines 'transgender' quite simply as referring to 'people who move away from the gender they were assigned at birth'.[82] Indeed, the novel's subtitle 'Changing Scenes' foregrounds a relationship with movement and displacement that structures Eva's complicated relationship to binary configurations of gender. Described as 'unfinished', 'monolithic', 'monstrous', 'eternal', 'artless', 'outsize, larger-than-life in every way', Eva is a fantastical creation who exceeds the boundaries of normality in almost every way, personifying queer as excess.[83] Her delayed development is what first marks her as queer: 'At fourteen Eva was showing no signs of puberty'.[84] This leads the other young people at her unconventional boarding school to ask 'Trout, are you a hermaphrodite?' Eva's response, 'I don't know', leaves the question of gender nonconformity open for the remainder of the novel.[85] Her teacher, Iseult, later reflects that 'she belonged in some other category. "Girl" never fitted Eva. Her so-called sex bored and mortified her; she dragged it about after her like a ball and chain'.[86] Eva's transness and the overt psychoanalytic framing of the novel calls for a reading that

[80] Bowen, *The Last September,* 204.
[81] Kathryn Bond Stockton, *The Queer Child, or Growing Sideways in the Twentieth Century* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2009), 11.
[82] Susan Stryker, *Transgender History* (Berkeley: Seal Press, 2008), 1.
[83] Elizabeth Bowen, *Eva Trout* (London: Vintage, 1999), 51, 214, 12, 86, 93, 179, 236.
[84] Bowen, *Eva Trout,* 49.
[85] Bowen, *Eva Trout,* 51.
[86] Bowen, *Eva Trout,* 243.

combines an understanding of the Kristevan abject with the trans experience of monstrosity theorised in Stryker's early work.[87]

Queer understandings of temporality, such as Stockton's, are a useful entry point into discussing Eva's characterisation. The temporal belatedness of Eva's life resonates with Halberstam's writing on 'queer time'; 'the perverse turn away from the narrative coherence of adolescence – early adulthood – marriage – reproduction – child rearing – retirement – death, the embrace of late childhood in place of early adulthood or immaturity in place of responsibility'.[88] Eva is certainly an immature twenty-four-year-old at the opening of the novel, 'A Very Rich Girl' with 'a passion for the fictitious', and her confused embrace of rituals of marriage and child-rearing, described as a 'harlequinade', are queered by their intensely performative quality.[89] But the novel also prompts a need to take up Nguyen Tan Hoang's suggestion that 'instead of bemoaning belatedness as an index of, say, arrested development or lack of responsibility, perhaps we can conceptualize it as a spatial movement out of the mainstream/into the margins'.[90] Read as part of the strand of Irish writing that deals with displaced, queerly-oriented cosmopolitans, Eva's belatedness fits into a narrative about the spatialisation of dynamics of abjection. Spatial movement is intimately related to identity formation in *Eva Trout*. Eva's difference stems from her rootless, displaced existence, brought up without a stable homeplace and parented primarily by her father's gay lover. As critics have noted, she is 'not at home anywhere',[91] 'always on the edge of belonging anywhere'.[92] 'The result of this displaced upbringing is alienation and outsider-ness for Eva'.[93] Claire Connolly's description of identity in *Eva Trout* as 'forged in the gaps between places, sexes, times, languages', gives a concise formulation of how Eva's transness is filtered through abjection, through her precarious location in a liminal transnational space.[94]

Eva's unconventional use of language is the focal point for this intersection of displacement and gender identity. She expresses herself 'like a displaced person', with an 'outlandish, cement-like conversational style'.[95] Perceptive readings by hoogland (1994) and Ingman (2007; 2017) have outlined how the novel draws on psychoanalytic discourse to explore 'the heroine's (non)acquisition of a (hetero)sexual gender identity'.[96] Her upbringing has circumvented heteronormative kinship structures, leaving her at a remove from the 'normal' world. Her non-entry into the Symbolic, in psychoanalytic terms, means that Eva conceives of

[87] Susan Stryker, 'My Words to Victor Frankenstein Above the Village of Chamounix: Performing Transgender Rage', *GLQ* 1.3 (1994): 237-254.
[88] Carolyn Dinshaw, Lee Edelman, Roderick A. Ferguson et. al., 'Theorizing Queer Temporalities: A Roundtable Discussion', *GLQ* 1 (2007): 182.
[89] Bowen, *Eva Trout,* 236, 242, 172.
[90] Dinshaw et. al., 183.
[91] Claire Connolly, '(Be)longing: The Strange Place of Elizabeth Bowen's Eva Trout', in *Borderlands: Negotiating Boundaries in Post-Colonial Writing,* ed. Monika Reif-Hülser (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1999), 136.
[92] Lassner, 143.
[93] Eibhear Walshe, 'Introduction'. Bowen, Elizabeth. *Eva Trout* (London: Vintage, 1999), ix.
[94] Connolly, 135.
[95] Bowen, *Eva Trout,* 17.
[96] hoogland, 208.

temporality and language *differently*. Iseult attempts to initiate her entry into the phallogocentric order — 'try joining things together: this, then that, then the other. That's thinking; at least, that's beginning to think'[97] — but the novel's defence of Eva is a prescient anticipation of the insights of queer and crip theory. The Symbolic order of 'thinking' and normative language eventually kills Eva, as her deaf child Jeremy is forced to assimilate by a team of therapists, and accidentally (or not?) ends by shooting his queer mother.

Eva's bond with Jeremy, which circumvents *normal* reproductive motherhood, is one example of queer kinship in the novel. Iseult also functions as a queer, surrogate mother-figure; their relationship is a complex mix of desire and hostility. Descriptions of Iseult's impact on Eva's development resonate with Corinne Hayden's theorisation of the 'generative role' of lesbian co-parents.[98] Biological relatedness is decentred as the act of begetting is reimagined to include notions of female authorship and creativity. Iseult's failure to successfully mother Eva, to bring her into being, is linked to her failure as a writer; the novel she tries to write is 'born dead'.[99] Her interest in Eva is also described as 'vivisectional',[100] which points to the sustained intertextual engagement in *Eva Trout* with Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* (1818). Eva's inability 'to speak – talk, be understood, converse' is directly linked to her characterisation as 'monstrous'; she is a 'creature' who has been 'left unfinished'.[101] Her hesitant articulations of her feelings of abandonment by Iseult are some of the most moving portions of the novel:

> 'She desisted from teaching me. She abandoned my mind. She betrayed my hopes, having led them on. She pretended love, to make me show myself to her — then, thinking she saw all, she turned away. She —'
> '— Wait a minute: what were your hopes?'
> 'To learn,' said Eva. A long-ago tremble shook her. 'To be, to become — I had never been.' She added: 'I was *beginning* to be.'[102]
>
> 'I remain gone. Where am I? I do not know — I was cast out from where I believed I was.'[103]
>
> 'I saw that she hated me, hated the work she had feared to finish. And I who WAS that work, who had hoped so much — how should I not hate her?'[104]

Deliberately echoing the rage of the rejected creature in Shelley's novel, Eva's monstrosity is constructed as abject.[105] Eva's experience bears remarkable similarities to the theorisation of

[97] Bowen, *Eva Trout,* 62.
[98] Corinne P. Hayden, 'Gender, Genetics, and Generation: Reformulating Biology in Lesbian Kinship', *Cultural Anthropology* 10.1 (1995): 51.
[99] Bowen, *Eva Trout,* 228.
[100] Bowen, *Eva Trout,* 33.
[101] Bowen, *Eva Trout,* 63, 104, 51.
[102] Bowen, *Eva Trout,* 184-185.
[103] Bowen, *Eva Trout,* 185
[104] Bowen, *Eva Trout,* 185
[105] Tina O'Toole, 'Unregenerate Spirits: The Counter-Cultural Experiments of George Egerton and Elizabeth Bowen', in *Irish Women Writers: New Critical Perspectives*, eds. Elke D'hoker, Raphaël Ingelbien, and Hedwig Schwall (Bern:

trans identity in the work of Susan Stryker. Stryker uses the figure of Frankenstein's monster in an iconic essay on 'Performing Transgender Rage' (1994), which helps in conceptualising the link between Eva's queer rage following the derailment of her bonds with other women – notably, Iseult, and her boarding school roommate Elsinore – and her gender expression. Stryker writes of the 'transformative power of a return from abjection' that she experienced by 'embracing and identifying with the figure of Frankenstein's monster'.[106] The transgressive power of the abject is channelled through Eva as she disrupts the heteronormative kinship structures around her, including (unwittingly or not, it is never quite clear) breaking up the marriage of Iseult and Eric. Total fragmentation is the result: of relationships, of plot, of realism and of temporality. Eva herself stands outside of the linear progression of time — 'She is eternal'; 'Time, inside Eva's mind, lay about like various pieces of a fragmented picture. She remembered, that is to say, disjectedly'.[107] Her experience of normative time is of a terrifying 'Deluge' unleashed by Jeremy's entry into language after years of silence: 'The torrents of the future went roaring by her. No beam lit their irresistible waters'.[108]

Eva dies, appropriately, in a train station, a 'temple of departure', eternally suspended in transit like so many of Bowen's and O'Brien's protagonists.[109] Her death reminds the reader of the violence of abjection and, importantly, of the privileging effects of cisgender identity for the other queer abjected figures studied here. In addition to this reminder, however, *Eva Trout* demonstrates the necessity of studying queer and trans representations together. Jack Halberstam has written about 'refusing to situate transition in relation to a destination, a final form, a specific shape, or an established configuration of desire and identity'.[110] Understanding the 'trans' of 'transnational' in this open-ended, non-teleological way opens up the possibilities of the queer transnational space. With Eva Trout, we can 'commit to a horizon of possibility where the future is not male or female but transgender', a radical proposition for twentieth-century Irish culture.[111]

Resistance and the Queer Transnational

Both Kate O'Brien and Elizabeth Bowen wrote in 'sceptical adjacency'[112] to the nationalist state formations that marked the queer as abject in twentieth century Ireland; however, the tone of that scepticism was markedly different for each writer. The terms of their access to state structures differed according to their cultural location. For 'Catholic-agnostic' nationalist O'Brien,[113] the impetus for writing the queer transnational is part of her forceful resistance to

Peter Lang, 2010), 229-244; Rosi Braidotti, *Nomadic Subjects: Embodiment and Sexual Difference in Contemporary Feminist Theory* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994).

[106] Susan Stryker, 'Transgender Studies: Queer Theory's Evil Twin', *GLQ* 10.2 (2004): 213.

[107] Bowen, *Eva Trout,* 93, 46.

[108] Bowen, *Eva Trout,* 233.

[109] Bowen, *Eva Trout,* 258.

[110] Jack Halberstam, *Trans*: A Quick and Quirky Account of Gender Variability* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2018), 4.

[111] Halberstam, 131.

[112] Patten, 7.

[113] Lorna Reynolds, *Kate O'Brien: A Literary Portrait* (Gerrards Cross: Colin Smythe, 1987), 118.

censorship and what she saw as an emerging authoritarianism in the Irish Free State, her determination to reject the narrowing definition of Irish womanhood and her deep sense of estrangement from a culture to which she might be assumed to belong. There is a greater proximity to the project of nation-building in her work; as Clare Boylan has written, her critiques of Irish culture are not 'an attack on her people', but rather 'a crusade against those who would inhibit their development'.[114] For the Anglo-Irish Elizabeth Bowen, the queer transnational seems to arise out of her hyphenated national identity. Just as Lois craves the liminality of a transnational 'no-place' in *The Last September*, Bowen is already positioned beyond the nation. Reading her in the context of national politics reveals a radical perspective on gender and sexuality that is equally part of the history of the Irish queer imaginary. By tracing the queer transnational through the work of two of the most prominent writers of the period, I hope to gesture in an expansive way towards the value of this term for further analysis of queerness in twentieth-century Irish culture. I assert the value of a joint study of Bowen and O'Brien, stylistically contrasting writers, in order to contest the assumption that there is one coherent aesthetic project that can be named as 'queer'. Both Bowen's textual irregularities and O'Brien's polemical queer politics have a vital part to play in assessments of Irish queerness.

Locating the queer transnational in Irish writing is part of an effort to open out the horizon of possibility for Irish queers, reclaiming our characterisation as abject in the nationalist imaginary and sketching an alternative history of resistance, however partial and unfulfilled. This is also, crucially, an alternative history of non-assimilation. Anna Murphy, Mary Lavelle, Agatha Conlan, Lois Farquar and Eva Trout provide models for a disidentificatory strand of queer thinking that works on and against the stock images of mainstream cisheteronormative culture.[115] Whether embracing the dissolving effects of exile, the intrusions of a destructive terrorist sensibility or the positionality of the enraged monster, their experiences of queer and trans abjection situate these characters in a queer transnational space. This is a history of resistance in which queer implies a transing of the nation that deconstructs the assumptions of gendered and national belonging.[116] Embedded in the work of two of Ireland's canonical *women writers* is a radical critique of the logics of categorisation, normalisation and homogenisation that form the intellectual foundations of the modern Irish nation-state.

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[114] Clare Boylan, introduction to *The Land of Spices,* by Kate O'Brien (London: Virago, 1988), xi.

[115] José Esteban Muñoz, *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999).

[116] Tudor, 20.

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